

So it has come to this . . . the queer “I” comes out televisually (hence the “eye”) as the avant-courier of a renovated, renovating capitalism. He (for this “queer” is not a she, or forbid, a transgender in-between) is of no real account beyond network ledger columns and a tally of happier heterosexuals, their unions reprieved by a barrage of consumer goods and the queerly salvational touch. And yet Queer Eye For the Straight Guy could never simply be a bourgeois fairies’ tale of heteronormative reparation. Sold to countries everywhere, the show metonymizes the consolidation of the Bush Jr-led United States of Empire (USE), itself undergoing a formidable combat-fatigue chic make over since 9/11, 2001. With the world on its receiving end, Queer Eye ably represents the USE’s current economic and political stature, loved and loathed on a global level. In this historical-material context, Queer Eye says a lot about (male) gender and (queer) sexuality, or better said, about class, cooption, and conquest.

Noting the connections between class and homosexuality in 1972, Guy Hocquenghem argued that capitalism responds effortlessly to the “growing homosexualization” of western societies by disarming, “deterritorializing,” homosexuality’s “destructive” liberatory potential: “Capitalism turns its homosexuals into failed ‘normal people,’ just as it turns its working class into an imitation of the middle class” (1993: 94). Queer Eye at once confirms this prescient axiom and amends it. The capitalism that underwrites this transitory spectacle, and whose products get regular walk-on roles and multiple ovations, equips its failed normal people with the means by which to turn working class men (and their female partners) into an imitation of the consumerist middle class represented, in this instance, by the failed normal people themselves. This process of imitation and domestication can be put another way, as David Collins, Queer Eye’s executive producer, does: “The concept was basically five gay professionals in fashion, grooming, interior design, culture, food and wine coming together as a team to help the straight men of the world find the job, get the look, get the girl” (Michael Idato 2003: 4). In keeping with this

mission, the Fab 5 fulfill their weekly brief to transform the straight man away from gaucherie and the ever-present danger of hetero-relationship failure. Each episode ends with the Fab 5 sipping champagne in a spacious loft apartment beyond the financial means of most viewers. Nicely ensconced, they assess the success of their day's work, before providing a run-down on the obscene surfeit of products whose future sales provide the show's *raison d'être*. Every week the outcome is the same: remade, the straight man will keep his woman, or be in a position to attract one. Each week, the failed normal men primp and pimp for the heterosexual economy.

It is worth noting, moreover, that Queer Eye has two more specific, yet easily overlooked, roles to play in heterosexuality's upkeep. First, by returning the improved straight men to their women, and asserting that the health of these relationships now rests on an untrammelled consumerism, the show participates in what Adrienne Rich calls "the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access" (1993: 238). Second, Queer Eye's purportedly queer habitus excludes the lesbian, a discounting--a making epistemologically irrelevant--that is also a key tactic in the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1993: 238).

The "queer" in Queer Eye thus appears to have no semantic affinity with the queer described by Michael Warner as promising a "thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (1993: xxxvi). Indeed, if Queer Eye is any measure, the once subversive promise of queer is being comically annihilated in the USE, indeed, wherever the US model of buffed and accessoried gayness exercises "from drab to fab" monopoly. The only promise here is the consistent affront afforded by an obsessive-compulsive brand-name shopping mania, a concomitant poverty of conversation, and a narcissistic concern with sanitized, homogenized, and blanched body surfaces and personalities (the first season's whitewash of Jai Rodríguez speaks volumes). Accordingly, it is difficult to sit through an episode of Queer Eye and not affirm "that being gay is like being made to wear that electronic helmet designed by tongue-lolling cheery Stimpny for his misanthropic friend Ren which forces the wearer to grin inanely and sing the 'Happy, Happy, Joy, Joy' song" (Mark Simpson 1996: xv).

Again, Hocquenghem provides an explanation for this scenario of queer cooption: "As long as homosexuality serves no purpose, it may at least be allowed to

contribute that little non-utilitarian ‘something’ towards the upkeep of the artistic spirit” (1993: 108). The queer who subscribes or succumbs to this logic occupies a social space of libidinal and political impotence. The tokenistic and therefore safe “upkeeping of the artistic spirit” in Queer Eye threatens no orders. So tamed, the show’s queer purview becomes symptomatic of the slow but inexorable dismantling of the hard-earned rights and ethical decencies bequeathed by civil rights activists in what increasingly appears to be a distant golden era. Such programming marks the defeat of queer desire’s radical potential to reterritorialize capitalism’s structural ally, the heterosexual economy. Herein lies Queer Eye’s unqueer rub. As Hocquenghem argues, “capitalism has turned the family into the rule inhabiting every individual under free competition,” with the result that the individual now reproduces the family’s “farcical games” (1993: 93). In Queer Eye’s particular traffic in “farcical games,” its enlisted queer individuals have no purpose but to playfully service the heterosexual unit and thus to safeguard the reproductive logics of capitalism.

It is no coincidence that the show emanates from the USE, a country with its own powerful discourse of individual self-fashioning somehow outside institutional limits and material history. The superficial work done by the Fab 5 is also meaningful in terms of this individualized national narrative as the group labors to sell the myth of innate perfectibility in an unconstrained “American” Dreamscape. Since the Fab 5 are the store-front agents by which this Dream is managed, they provide a differently dressed parallel to those other representatives of the USE who are routinely authorized to uphold their state’s role as the worldwide nemesis of so-called rogue regimes. Indeed, when the most extrovert of the Fab 5, Carson Kressley, scrawls “Bad Taste Kills” on the door of one rogue target, the analogy between the War on Terror and the War on Terrible Taste does not seem far-fetched, notwithstanding the (televised) reality that Kressley is clearly “unburdened by a sense of irony” (Idato 2003: 5). Both wars are conducted as just and righteous enterprises. Both require a Dreamscape reasoning that can only recognize (US) good/taste and (non-, un-, anti-American) evil/tastelessness.

Confronted by the popularity of Queer Eye on its introduction to Australia in September 2003, one reviewer opined, “When shows like these are hailed as groundbreaking you have to wonder just what Americans think groundbreaking

actually means” (Idato 2003: 5). While I wait in vain for a truly queer Queer Eye, I do have a suggestion for a Queer Eye that resiles from waving a cosmetic wand over the aesthetically challenged in a regenerative process whose aim is the proliferation of docile queer replicants. This Queer Eye would be composed of the following: a black lesbian mother of five beautiful, well-adjusted children; a dyke or fag whose first, second and third languages are not English, and who, shifting between those linguistic options, can initiate stimulating conversations on a range of pressing political issues; a transgendered person barely making do somewhere in the vast USE gun-and-bible-belt; someone in the last evacuating stages of AIDS; and a blind bisexual or alternative sexual polymorph for whom touch and sound matter more than inane first-sighted impressions. Assuming that a green-card could be arranged, one or more of these people would represent a country recently destabilized or devastated by USE forces. Like its predecessor, this Queer Eye would aim for permanent transformation on a weekly basis. But the new Fab 5 would not be serving as pimps for the heterosexual economy, the consumerist ethos, or the US superpower. Rather, these operatives would provide their clients with a “zhoozhing” day of good old-fashioned consciousness-raising, dispensing tips on civil disobedience, class struggle and collective resistance, and chairing workshops on how to attain viable queer coalitions. And they could even conduct some history lessons on patriarchy, racism, neoimperialism, global capitalism, and their very necessary discontents.

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